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ABSTRACT

Of the 6,076 students enrolled at Thomas Nelson Community College (TNCC) in fall 1985, 2,389 (39.3%) were "leavers," i.e., they did not graduate and they did not return in winter 1986. Because new students made up 33.8% of the total fall headcount, but accounted for 41.7% of the leavers, a study was conducted to investigate the characteristics of the leavers and why these students left TNCC. The study focused on students' race, sex, age, and grade point average (GPA). Study findings included the following: (1) the attrition rate for the 18-21 age group (33.9%) was much lower than that for other age groups, all of which had rates higher than 50%; (2) the attrition rate for black females was 39.1%, while black males had an attrition rate of 53.7%; (3) the three major factors identified as contributing to attrition at TNCC were employment, poor academic performance, and nebulous pre-matriculation academic goals and uncertainty about major; and (4) the attrition rate among students seeking to upgrade employment skills for their present job, develop new job skills, or explore a career, or for personal satisfaction was 62.7%, while the attrition rate among students enrolled in curricula leading to an associate degree or certificate was 33.5%. (EJV)

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ATTRITION AMONG NEW STUDENTS IN FALL QUARTER 1985

Introduction

Of the 6076 students enrolled in Fall Quarter 1985, 2389 (39.3%) of them were "leavers", that is, they did not graduate and they did not enroll in Winter Quarter 1986. Because new students made up 33.8% of the total headcount in fall but accounted for 41.7% of the leavers, and also because of the wealth of information on these students, this report will concentrate on them. The report will also attempt to draw some conclusions about why many of these students left TNCC.

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Thomas Nelson Community College

New Students, Fall 1985

There were 2053 new students enrolled at TNCC in Fall 1985, with 996 (48.5%) of them not enrolling for classes in Winter Quarter 1986. The majority of the new students (1952, 95.1%) took at least one course for college credit. From this group 907 (46.5%) students left after Fall Quarter.

Table 1 shows the leavers who took at least one college credit by race, sex, and age group. The attrition rate for the age group 18-21 years (33.9%) was much lower than that for other age groups, all of which had rates higher than 50%. The rate for black females (39.1%) was lower than the rate for the other three major ethnic-gender groups, with black males having the highest rate of attrition (53.7%).

Table 2 shows attrition rates by credit hours attempted and age group. We would expect students taking more hours to have more well-defined goals and show more persistence than students taking fewer hours. This does seem to be the case. The attrition rate among students taking 1-3 credit hours was 64.7%; among students taking more than 12 credit hours, the rate was only 17.4%. In fact, 68.5% of the leavers took 1-3 credit hours.

Table 3 shows attrition rates by GPA and age group. Of the 281 new students with a GPA between 0.00 and 0.99, 202 (71.9%) did not return for Winter Quarter. Surprisingly, the attrition rate for students with a GPA between 3.00 and 4.00 was 45.8%, almost the same as the overall rate for new students and higher that the rate for students with a GPA between 1.00 and 2.99. In fact, 54.9% of the leavers had a GPA of 3.00 or higher.

Table 4 helps explain this. Of the 907 leavers, 371 completed entering student surveys when they applied for admission. The demographical composition of the leavers who completed the survey is fairly representative of the group of leavers as a whole. One of the questions on the survey asks about

educational goals while attending TNCC. Table 4 shows the percentage who stated "planning to leave after one quarter" as their goal, the percentage that actually left, and the ratio of actual percentage to planned percentage for various groups. For students with a GPA between 3.00 and 4.00, the ratio is comparitively small (1.61). A larger percentage of this group (28.5%) stated an intention to leave after one quarter than any other group. On the other hand, only 9.6% of the students with a GPA between 0.00 and 1.99 were planning to leave after one quarter, while 58.9% actually left.

Reasons for leaving

There are three major factors we can identify from the data we have that contribute to attrition at TNCC: employment factors, academic performance, and pre-matriculation academic goals and major certainty.

Bean and Metzner (1985) make reference to four studies of 2-year commuter colleges that show that the number of hours of employment per week (more than twenty hours) is negatively related to persistence in college, while part-time employment (twenty hours or less) had little effect on persistence; in fact, one study found that students who work part-time show greater persistence than students who are unemployed.

Among new students in fall, 71.6% of the leavers were planning to work full-time compared to only 54.3% for persisters. Persisters were more likely to be planning to work part-time than leavers (30.0% v 18.9%). Friedman and Dennett (1985) found that employment factors were cited by 42.7% of full-time students at Northern Virginia Community College as a reason for leaving the school after Winter Quarter 1985.

As noted earlier, academic performance seems to have an impact on a student's decision to leave TNCC. However, it is probably a mistake to view this as a leading cause of attrition rather than a major symptom of attrition.

The age group 18-21 years had a much larger percentage of new students with GPA's under 2.00 than any other age group (40.9% v 25.4% for the next highest group) but by far the lowest attrition rate among these students (46.2% v 71.9% for the next lowest group). However, the 18-21 years age group takes a higher average number of credit hours, has a much lower percentage of students working full-time, and are more likely to be seeking a degree in a declared major.

There were 750 new students enrolled at TNCC during Fall Quarter in the following unclassified categories: upgrading employment skills for present job, developing skills for new job, career exploration, and personal satisfaction. The attrition rate among these students was 62.7%, with 471 students not returning for Winter Quarter. While 258 students in this group had a GPA under 2.00, with 80.6% of them leavers, the majority of the students in this group (472, or 65.6%) had a GPA of 2.00 or better; yet 55.7% of these unclassified students in good academic standing were leavers. While poor academic performance can explain some attrition, it cannot explain most of it.

The students in the unclassified group have one thing (at least) in common: a nebulous pre-matriculation goal. The attrition rate among new students enrolled in curriculums that lead to an associate degree, diploma or certificate was 33.5%. The rate for all others was 68.0%. Bean and Metzner (1985) cite several studies that show certainty of major to be positively related to persistence of students at 2-year commuter colleges. Staman (1980) found that major certainty was strongly related to persistence among students aged 22-45.

Discussion and Conclusions

Attrition is a difficult problem to deal with, and high attrition rates are being experienced almost universally in higher education. Most of the research done on attrition points out variables that cannot explain most attrition rather than variables that can. However, some researchers, for example, Cope and Hannah (1975) feel that attrition should be studied on an institutional level because institutional characteristics have a large effect on persistence. Gates and Creamer (1984) studied 4854 high school students who enrolled in two-year colleges and found that only 4.3% of the variation in retention status could be explained by pre-enrollment characteristics. Indeed, Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) conclude that what happens to a student at a college after enrolling is more important than the characteristics the student brings with him.

One program that has achieved tremendous success (Glennen and Baxley, 1985) is an intrusive advising program instituted at Western New Mexico University, a state-supported school that offers associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees. The basis for the program is that most students at Western who dropped out had not received enough individual attention and needed developmental studies programs. These students were also unlikely to voluntarily seek advising and counseling. In the program, students identified as high risk students were required to meet with an advisor during the first or second week of the semester. Students who were experiencing academic difficulty were required to meet with an advisor during mid-semester. In the two-year period after the program was instituted, the attrition rate for freshmen fell from 66% to 25%.

This report raises as many questions as it answers. However, it has identified some probable reasons for attrition at TNCC and some of the groups who should be considered high risk. Even though attrition is a difficult problem, it is one that must be dealt with if we are to serve the community and reverse declining enrollments.

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Table 1

NEW STUDENTS TAKING AT LEAST ONE COLLEGE CREDIT
BY RACE, SEX, AND AGEGROUP

	18-21			22-24			25-34			35-44			45-59			Total		
	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return
Black Female	29	111	26.1	11	23	47.8	44	81	54.3	14	35	40.0	4	11	36.4	102	261	39.1
Black Male	32	69	46.4	24	35	68.6	22	42	52.4	11	21	52.4	5	8	62.5	94	175	53.7
White Female	94	268	35.1	64	114	56.1	107	214	50.0	74	140	52.9	44	71	62.0	383	807	47.5
White Male	81	232	34.9	48	97	49.5	118	208	56.7	38	68	55.9	22	43	51.2	307	648	47.4
Other Female	0	6	0.0	3	4	75.0	5	12	41.7	3	4	75.0	1	1	100.0	12	27	44.4
Other Male	1	14	7.1	3	3	100.0	4	12	33.3	1	4	25.0	0	1	0.0	9	34	26.5
TOTAL	237	700	33.9	153	276	55.4	300	569	52.7	141	272	51.8	76	135	56.3	907	1952	46.5

Table 2

NEW STUDENTS TAKING AT LEAST ONE COLLEGE CREDIT
BY CREDITS AND AGEGROUP

	18-21			22-24			25-34			35-44			45-59			Total		
Credits	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return
1-3	110	189	58.2	104	151	68.9	231	340	67.9	108	177	61.0	68	103	66.0	621	960	64.7
4-6	57	150	38.0	31	61	50.8	50	131	38.2	25	52	48.1	4	17	23.5	167	411	40.6
7-9	25	119	21.0	11	29	37.9	9	39	23.1	2	13	15.4	2	6	33.3	49	206	23.8
10-12	27	119	22.7	1	9	11.1	2	18	11.1	1	7	14.3	1	4	25.0	32	157	20.4
13-15	11	67	16.4	2	13	15.4	2	18	11.1	1	5	20.0	0	2	0.0	16	105	15.2
>15	7	56	12.5	4	13	30.8	6	23	26.1	4	18	22.2	1	3	33.3	22	113	19.5
TOTAL	237	700	33.9	153	276	55.4	300	569	52.7	141	272	51.8	76	135	56.3	907	1952	46.5

Table 3

NEW STUDENTS TAKING AT LEAST ONE COLLEGE CREDIT
BY GRADE POINT AVERAGE AND AGEGROUP

	18-21			22-24			25-34			35-44			45-59			Total		
GPA	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return	# Did Not Return	Total # New	% Did Not Return
0.00-0.99	93	152	61.2	38	46	82.6	42	49	85.7	13	17	76.5	16	17	94.1	202	281	71.9
1.00-1.99	39	134	29.1	17	24	70.8	15	30	50.0	10	15	66.7	6	7	85.7	87	210	41.4
2.00-2.99	40	194	20.6	24	45	53.3	28	76	36.8	18	37	48.6	10	21	47.6	120	373	32.2
3.00-4.00	65	220	29.5	74	161	46.0	215	414	51.9	100	203	49.3	44	90	48.9	498	1088	45.8
TOTAL	237	700	33.9	153	276	55.4	300	569	52.7	141	272	51.8	76	135	56.3	907	1952	46.5

Table 4

PLANNED TO LEAVE VERSUS ACTUALLY LEFT
FOR VARIOUS GROUPS

	% Planned to leave after one quarter	% Actually left	Ratio actual / planned
Age Group			
18-21	24.3	33.9	1.40
22-24	9.5	55.4	5.83
25-34	16.2	52.7	3.25
35-44	10.8	51.8	4.80
45-59	13.5	56.3	4.17
GPA			
0.00-0.99	11.0	71.9	6.54
1.00-1.99	3.3	41.4	12.55
2.00-2.99	15.0	32.2	2.15
3.00-4.00	28.5	45.8	1.61
Race/Sex			
Black Female	18.9	39.1	2.07
Black Male	22.9	53.7	2.34
White Female	15.3	47.5	3.10
White Male	17.3	47.4	2.74
Other Female	22.2	44.4	2.00
Other Male	40.0	26.5	0.66
TOTAL	17.8	46.5	2.61

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